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NDEA FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTITUTE PROGRAMS--THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW EDUCATIONAL MODEL.

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTITUTE PROGRAMS, HAVING ADOPTED A STRUCTURE OUTSIDE OF THE DOMINANT MODEL IN EDUCATION, HIGHLIGHT WHAT IS WRONG WITH THE ESTABLISHED HIGHER EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AND GIVE CLUES AS TO HOW IT MAY BE IMPROVED. THESE INSTITUTE PROGRAMS OFFER A PERSONALIZED ATMOSPHERE, WITH CURRICULAR UNITY, WHERE LEARNING IS MORE OF A GROUP ACTIVITY, AND GRADES ARE DEEMPHASIZED. THIS CONTRASTS SHARPLY WITH THE REGULAR PROGRAMS OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES, WHERE THERE IS A COMPETITIVE, DEPERSONALIZED ATMOSPHERE, A DEPARTMENTAL AND SUBDEPARTMENTAL RIVALRY, AN EMPHASIS ON GRADE POINTS AND COURSE CREDITS, AND A SUBORDINATION OF TEACHING TO TELLING AND LEARNING TO RECEIVING. A PROCESS BY WHICH THE CONSTRUCTIVE EXPERIENCES AFFORDED BY FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTITUTES CAN BE INCORPORATED EFFECTIVELY INTO AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION MUST BE DISCOVERED SO THAT THE INSTITUTES WILL SERVE AS EDUCATIONAL MODELS AND THOSE WHO RECOGNIZE THEIR VALUE CAN BECOME EFFECTIVE AGENTS OF CHANGE WITHIN THE GREATER SYSTEM. THIS ARTICLE IS A REPRINT FROM "PMLA," VOLUME 82, NUMBER 4, SEPTEMBER 1967, PAGES 14-18. (SS)

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NDEA FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTITUTE PROGRAMS: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW EDUCATIONAL MODEL*

By Joseph Axelrod, *San Francisco State College*

MY TOPIC for this afternoon has been announced as "The Ends, Means, and Accomplishments of the NDEA Modern Foreign Language Institutes." That is indeed the topic I shall speak on, but before I come directly to it, I should like to deliver a message. The message I want to deliver is a simple one, and it is brief. It consists of only three sentences.

The first sentence goes this way: The profession has had an unusually rich experience in the eight years that the NDEA institutes have been running, and during the course of that experience we have learned an enormous amount about specific ways of training language teachers and we have also gained important, more general knowledge about higher education.

That is the first sentence of my message, and I shall amplify upon it in the course of my remarks.

The second sentence of my message is not as easy to formulate. I want it to say that, on the whole, this rich experience has not yet been put to use on our campuses, in our regular programs; that the profession hasn't yet really taken advantage of the knowledge it has gained. However, I do not wish to state it that way; that formulation has the wrong implication. It implies we are so rigid we have not allowed new learnings and new ideas to affect our practice. This is an implication I cannot accept. I am convinced that it is not *we* who are rigid—i.e., we as individual members of the higher education establishment. I believe, rather, that as individuals we are most flexible—indeed, eager to make changes we feel are desirable. The fact, as I see it, is that we in higher education find ourselves caught in a total System which is so inflexible as to allow only the most innocuous modifications by individuals such as ourselves. Let me add that I have made special studies of the System, and I cannot convey to you in this brief time how inflexible I have found it. I could make your hair stand on end. Now, the most significant feature of the language institutes, in my opinion, resides in the fact that they were not conceived as part of the established System and have not been conducted as part of the established System. As a matter of fact, I attribute the enormous success of the NDEA language institute program, in large part, to the fact that the institutes have been conducted outside of the established System, that they followed an entirely different model.

So, in formulating the second sentence of my message, I would be giving an impression I do not mean to give if I were to say that most of us have not taken advantage of the rich experience the institute programs have given us—have not, in other words, used this new knowledge to improve our regular programs. The sentence must be revised to read as follows: The System (with a capital S) which most of us find ourselves working in has thus far *prevented* us from making use of the knowledge we have gained in the course of our rich experience with the NDEA institutes.

That, then, is the second sentence.

In the last sentence of my message, I want to summon the call to action. I want to say something like: "Let's not allow that rich experience to be lost; let's take advantage of it." But, clearly, to put it that way is poor rhetoric. It is poor not only on the stylistic level; it is also poor because it misstates the idea. It implies that we *could* act if only we wanted to. But, if the second sentence of my message is true, then the problem is not that we don't want to, but that we are unable to. Clearly what we must do first is to gain a certain knowledge we do not yet have. We must discover how we can introduce change into a System that has yielded very little to our efforts thus far.

So the last sentence of my message today must read as follows: Since the profession wants to take advantage of the rich experience it has had during the last eight years in conducting NDEA language institutes but finds itself caught in the System, and since it cannot expect that blind, random, and sporadic efforts to change the System will be anything but wasteful and fruitless, the most sensible course of action is to discover what processes lead to change in the System and then work things out so we control those processes.

That is my message and the end of the first

* An address delivered at the General Session of the Foreign Language Program in New York, 29 December 1966.

part of my talk. For Part II, I shall move directly on my topic and then, as you might suspect, Part III will be a kind of Finale in which the message of Part I and the observations of Part II will be joined together.

I do mean now to pass directly to my topic. But please forgive me if I do not dwell on the obvious. For example, there is no point in my taking the time to review here the many shelves of evidence that have accumulated since 1959, bearing witness to the success of the language institute program. As you know, the program has been evaluated almost every year since its inception by teams of men and women sitting in this audience, and we know from these studies that the impact of the institute program on secondary and elementary school language teaching has become greater each year. I do not propose to review that evidence for you.

Nor shall I recite the goals which the profession has agreed are appropriate for teacher-training programs and which, indeed, have been the ends the institutes have set for themselves. The MLA Guidelines for Teacher Education Programs are reprinted in various places and are easily available to you. Nor do I wish to dwell on the particular means the institutes have been using to accomplish these ends. Let me only say that when carried out with intelligence, those ends have been found to be clearly viable. They are described in numerous documents in the literature, including the report of the Committee which I chaired that was published by the MLA last spring.

What I want to do now is move to another level altogether. I want to talk about the educational model which the institutes have followed, and I want to contrast that model with the college and university model that is currently dominant in American higher education. Please notice that I am not speaking of a model for training language teachers; and I am not speaking about model degree programs in foreign language departments or schools of education. I want to talk about the whole System. I want to talk about some ideas I have which relate to a new model for higher education in America, a viable model in which conditions come into being that foster the best learning. The ideas I hope to impart here could never have been conceived, were it not for my experience with the institute program.

The institute model has several characteristic features which contrast sharply with the current—I'll call it *standard*—model in American higher education. The most characteristic feature of the institute model is its "personalized" atmosphere. Forgive that phrase; I don't know what else to label it, but those of you who have taught at institutes or visited them will know immediately what I mean. It is a kind of simple human warmth that you feel the moment you enter the circle of an institute. It is a circle that is inhabited by individuals, by students and faculty, who care for one another and want to help one another. The evidence we have accumulated stresses again and again the intense personalization of the institute experience for every participant, almost without exception.

In contrast, the standard model in the American college or university has become increasingly characterized by depersonalization, by competitiveness, by a sense of isolation for the individuals—faculty and students alike—who live in these academic so-called communities. Speaking at the Association of Higher Education Conference last year, Mervin Freedman asserted that students rarely had "the opportunity of sharing or cooperating with other people in a venture that has meaning or value for all participants." But he was happy to report that on a number of innovative campuses efforts were being made "to counter the atmosphere of competitiveness and isolation which have prevailed on most campuses since the early 1950's."[1] It is interesting to note that this analysis supplies the basis for Freedman's interpretation of the Berkeley events of 1964–65,[2] and the Byrne Report to the Regents confirms Freedman's reading of those events.[3] The increase of competitiveness and the sense of individual isolation has not been characteristic only of the larger campuses. These tendencies have been on the increase in small colleges as well. And do not suppose that while depersonalization has been characteristic of undergraduate education, it is absent in the graduate schools. Orlans reported that in some of the universities he studied, it took graduate students several months to arrange an appointment with their dissertation advisor.[4] And—an even more disquieting discovery—in a dozen

[1] "Pressures on Students," in *Current Issues in Higher Education*, ed. G. Kerry Smith (Washington: Association for Higher Education, 1965), p. 149.

[2] Ibid., pp. 149–50.

[3] Jerome C. Byrne, "Special Report to the Forbes Committee of the Board of Regents, The University of California." Reprinted in the *Los Angeles Times*, 12 May 1965, Pt. IV, p. 3.

[4] Harold Orlans, *The Effects of Federal Programs on Higher Education: A Study of Thirty-Six Universities and Colleges* (Washington: Brookings Inst., 1962), p. 52.

name universities that came within the scope of his study, Orlans found that a fifth of the graduate faculty members were not able to greet their *advanced* graduate students by name![5]

This has not been the fate of participants in the NDEA language institutes. In none of the institutes did participants experience the sense of isolation that is so characteristic of students on American campuses today.

What is the secret? It lies in the creation of a new "primary group"—a group of staff and students whose teaching and learning activities are organized in such a way that everything encourages their coming to know one another, caring for one another, helping one another. As you probably know, a few revolutionary campuses are now attempting to break the standard pattern in American education by adopting the plan of student "clusters," as they call them, in order to combat depersonalization. So it is interesting that the institutes have been using this new way of organizing learning ever since they started.

Another feature of the institute programs to which they owe their success, in part, is their freedom from the vested interests of departmental and subdepartmental groups. Indeed, instead of becoming the victims of these rivalries, the institutes have been able to provide bridges for rival departmental and subdepartmental groups. The institute office often constitutes the tent in which the pipe of peace is shared.

The *standard* model in American higher education displays, as you know, a crisscross of departmental lines that makes one wonder how genuine learning or real communication can ever take place. It is not merely a matter of this type of organization or that, for the problem seems to be there, whether the departments are organized broadly or narrowly. If you have a large, broad department, including several languages and several disciplines, rivalry often reigns among the subdepartmental groups nevertheless. If in the same department you have specialists in several languages in various disciplines—in, for example, literary history, aesthetics, practical criticism and textual analysis, theoretical linguistics, old-fashioned philology, language study and applied linguistics, the study of foreign civilization and teaching methodology—then each specialist tends to think his sub-area should get the biggest slice of almost any departmental pie. Furthermore degree programs tend to become compromise scissors-and-paste curricula that make sense only in terms of the power structure in the department.

On the other hand, if, instead of being housed in a single department, these different language areas and the different disciplines are divided up into different departments, then matters are even worse. The linguist and the literature man and the methodology man are then responsible to different department chairmen, are subjected to different pressures, feel different loyalties on campus, and if they do make contact with one another, they have a pretty hard time trying to communicate over their departmental walls. You all know the picture only too well.

What a refreshing difference when one turns to the institute organization. Of course there are problems, but they are of a different sort. If there are several disciplines which must be taught, a place is found for all of the disciplines that are relevant. The criterion for inclusion is quite clear: relevance to the real tasks for which the institute participant is being prepared. Real tasks, not mythical ones that he pursues in college or in graduate school only because they will earn him a degree and then turns away from with relief, once he has the degree.

Thus, in planning institute curricula, new principles of curricular unity have been sought and put to use. And these new principles have been both philosophically sound and viable. The old, meaningless distinctions that still contaminate so much of the thinking in higher education have played no role in organizing the institutes. I refer to such distinctions as the one which opposes the liberal arts to professional studies. That opposition, as an idea, is worse than useless. I can't stop to argue the point, but if you're in doubt, read Whitehead's discussion of it.[6] Or consider the old metaphor that opposes depth to breadth. It may be useful in cultivating agricultural fields but the analogy with fields of knowledge leads only to confusion. Yet a great deal of current thinking in the higher education establishment is still trapped in this outmoded metaphor. When a framework of thought has outlived its usefulness, we must find some way to liberate ourselves from it.

The institutes fortunately have been able to free themselves from such outmoded think-

[5] Orlans, p. 49.

[6] Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1929).

ing. They were able to find new principles of unity in planning curricula. I do not propose that those principles are appropriate for non-institute programs; I want rather to stress the fact that this freedom of thought can be achieved. This departure from the standard model—this liberation from the outworn metaphors and distinctions by which traditional curricula have developed—is, then, another reason that, in my view, explains the success of the institute program.

A third reason has been the adoption of a new and more accurate notion of how human beings learn. The institutes have not only asked their participants to investigate the nature of learning; they have actually attempted to redefine teaching and learning for themselves. The result has been that institute classes have an entirely different texture and atmosphere than regular college and university classes. The basic differences are difficult to explain, and I do not want to list the merely external differences. It might help to get at the essence of the difference if I say that in regular college and university classes, where the standard model dominates, teaching is mainly telling, and learning is mainly receiving. The student is treated as a kind of information storage and retrieval unit. Storage takes place during class and study sessions; retrieval takes place during examination sessions. The analogy may not be exact, and I am surely not using the analogy the way Marshall McLuhan used it in his talk yesterday afternoon, but you know what I mean, I'm sure. Indeed, the analogy may even make you uncomfortable; it does me.

In moving away from the concept of the student as an information storage and retrieval unit, the institutes have been quite daring. They have, for example, abandoned the idea prevalent in the world of higher education that if you are having fun while you're learning, you can't be learning very much; or that in any case, you oughtn't to get academic credit. They have abandoned the sacred hierarchy according to which certain kinds of learning—like learning by concepts or learning from books—are considered intrinsically superior and more appropriate to college and university work than certain other kinds of learning, like interviewing people or acting in a play. They have rejected the notion that only those activities are educational that are done by and for a properly certified (preferably with Ph.D.) member of the faculty. They have, for example, been able to use non-professional and relatively inexpensive native speakers in interesting, creative ways as regular staff members.

Indeed, in the institute model, the whole activity of learning is different. How shall I describe it? It is more of a group activity: it pervades much more of the learner's day, involving thirty to thirty-five hours a week of daytime classes and other group activities; it makes far greater efforts to involve his whole person.

In thus moving away from the standard model, the institutes have also had to abandon the traditional counting methods which are characteristic of the American college and university. In the standard college and university model, everything goes, as you know, by count. A student who receives so many credits for so many hours for so many weeks for so many years, with a grade-point average not under such and such, is certified to be an educated man.

The institute model has freed itself from the yoke of that fallacy to a large degree. The boldest institutes have broken away completely from the traditional credit and grading system altogether. But even the less bold have worked out ways of satisfying the registrars on their campuses while they have been able to avoid the evils of the grading system and of the bookkeeping system of credits and points on which American higher education thrives. A few institutes, it is true, still pay too much attention to grades. It has been the observation of evaluation teams to institutes that the more attention participants and faculty pay to grades, the more questionable the real accomplishments of the institute.

The most serious consequence of excessive attention to grades is that it sets up a competition, a kind of competitive game—sometimes easy and friendly but often tense and vicious—between the student body and the faculty. A Haverford student described the prevailing climate excellently; today's student, he wrote, "has no choice but to . . . try to fool the professor into believing that what has been assigned has been done. . . . The whole academic set-up is turning from one of mutual endeavor into one of mutual deceit."[7]

But not in the institute model. At an institute, what has the gamesman to gain? The atmosphere that pervades an institute does not actually prevent the gamesman from playing his games of petty deceit, but why should he

[7] *Record, 1963, the Haverford College Yearbook*, Scott Gilliam, editor-in-chief, pp. 115–116.

play them if he gains nothing by being victorious. The point is that when the game doesn't exist, opponents playing it don't come into existence either.

These, then, are some of the contrasts between the institute model and the model followed on the campuses where ninety-five per cent of us in this room make our careers. To see these contrasts clearly and to realize what the implications are for regular college and university programs—not just in the language field but throughout American higher education—that is the most important lesson, I believe, we can learn from our institute experience.

The institute program has not only highlighted for us what is wrong with the System; it has also given us clues as to how we might go about improving the System. Remember that the institutes were conceived and came into being outside of the System. They purposely adopted another structure; they began by rejecting the dominant model in American education.

We can be proud of our profession, that it had the wisdom and courage to take that step. And now, this moment, we stand at another and even more important fork in the road. Do we have the wisdom and courage to make the right choice once again?

Editor's Note: *PMLA* readers who wish to receive an annotated bibliography on the subject of this address should send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to the author: Dr. Joseph Axelrod, Visiting Research Professor, Center for Research and Development in Higher Education, 1947 Center St., Berkeley, Calif. 94720.